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ABSTRACT

Research has consistently shown black clients to attend sessions less regularly and to completely drop out of treatment more often than their white counterparts. This study compared use of group, presenting concerns, reactions to other group members, and the service utilization patterns of group members in one all black and one all white women's therapy groups. Group members were female university students participating in either the black (N=7) or the white (N=12) therapy groups. Groups met once a week for 90 minutes and were observed over a 4-month period by a counselor serving as co-leader for both groups. Attendance, problems presented, and group activities were monitored. The results revealed that most black subjects had had no prior contact with the use of psychological services; all white subjects had had prior contact with such services. Black subjects had low and sporadic attendance at sessions; white subjects had high and consistent attendance. White subjects expressed anger less often than did black subjects, and responded more slowly and less often to those members who did express anger. White subjects focused on family or origin; blacks focused on present struggles. There was more similarity among white subjects and greater diversity among black subjects in terms of racial identity levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, past experiences, and values and attitudes. These findings have implications for programming. (NB)

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Black/White Women in Groups; Some Suggestions for Minority-Sensitive Group Services Programming on Predominantly White University Campuses

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BLACK/WHITE WOMEN IN GROUP THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

Differences between Black and White university women's use of and reactions to ongoing group therapy are presented. Alternatives for group service programming are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The curative factors existing in group therapy have been clearly defined and accepted as applicable for most populations (Apaka & Sanges, 1962; Burnside, 1978; Lowry, 1967; Ohlsen, 1977; Yalom, 1985). The instillation of hope, universality, imparting of information, altruism, the corrective recapitulation of the primary family group, the development of socializing techniques, imitative behavior, interpersonal learning, group cohesiveness, catharsis and existential factors have been identified as factors operating in every type of therapy group. Only the severely emotionally and cognitively disabled (the brain damaged, the paranoid, the hypochondriacal, those addicted to drugs or alcohol, the acutely psychotic, the sociopathic client, and the deeply depressed suicidal client) have been designated as those which would not benefit from or benefit other members in ongoing therapy groups (Yalom, 1985). Group therapy has been accepted by most mental health professionals as a viable and effective mode of therapy for all other clientele (Bernard, 1979; Brabender, 1983; Gazda, Duncan, & Meadows, 1967; O'Brien, 1979; Schlossberg, 1976).

Group therapy also has been said to present a superior approach to counseling the minority client, in particular, due to the major advantage it has over the one-to-one counseling approach, the diffusion and avoidance of the possible detrimental effects of counselor bias (Acosta, 1977; Anderson & Oho, 1984; Mardoyan & Weis, 1981; President's Commission on Mental Health, 1978; Sue, 1977; Yamamoto, James, & Palley, 1968). Group counseling presents a method of diffusing or avoiding the possible detrimental effects of counselor bias This may be of particular importance, given that most of counseling services have predominantly White staff members, from middle-class backgrounds and little or no cross-cultural contacts and/or training (Acosta, 1977; President's

Commission on Mental Health, 1978; Sue, 1977). It would seem even most crucial that counseling center program developers install a special unit addressing minority group services, however, this often is not the case.

Research, although limited, supports the effectiveness of all Black groups over those groups consisting of Black members in predominantly White groups (Brayboy, 1971; Cross, 1976; Davis, Sharfstein, & Owens, 1974; Smith & Gundlack, 1974; Suggs, 1975). Black clients were consistently found to attend sessions less regularly (Acosta, 1980; Krebs, 1971; Raynes & Warrens, 1969) and completely drop out of treatment more often than White counterparts (Cole & Pilsrek, 1976; Gardner, 1971). These differences in behaviors have been attributed to racism and prejudice existing in the counselor and group members (Davis, 1979; Ibrahim, 1985; Lubin, Hornstra, Lewis & Bechtel, 1973; Sue, McKenney, Allen, & Hall, 1974). Avoiding such negative experiences would seem to be a normal reaction on the part of Black women, especially after having to survive and struggle through the daily battles with racism in the work and school environments (Delgado, 1982). In addition, many Black women also suffer lower economic status which might result in many presenting problems being crises that would be more amenable to shorter-term, action-oriented therapy (Acosta, Yamamoto, Evans & Wilcox, 1982). Most often such differences are interpreted as legitimate cause to ignore the development of such minority programming or eliminate any current attempts in that direction. The message becomes clear: If clients do not behave the way clinicians have deemed appropriate, such clientele do not deserve service (Brill & Storrow, 1960; Lorion, 1974; United States Department of Health Education and Welfare, 1979; Yamamoto, James, Bloombaum, and Hattem, 1967).

Another view is that such differences in response patterns to mental health services would seemingly reflect differences in life experiences between Black

and White women and indicate a need for a developing group services programming specifically for Black women (Acosta, Yamamoto, J., & Evans, 1982; Lefley & Bestman, 1984; Marsella, Pedersen, 1981). However, currently there is a deficit in the literature addressing differences between Black and White women. Researchers have tended to submerge data on Black women under topics such as counseling blacks or counseling women (Smith, 1985). The dual membership of Black women in two special-interest groups, one Black, the other White, has led to researchers' overlooking their unique psychosocial status (Allen, 1979). Also as previously mentioned, most studies have only focused on attendance to sessions and frequency of early self-termination as the most critical variables. The present study compared use of group, presenting concerns, and reactions to other group members, in addition to, the service utilization patterns of group members in one all Black and one all White women's therapy groups. Results should assist in the collection of information which would facilitate the development of effective group services for Black women. The comparison to White women's use of services and interaction within group will indicate the alterations that should be made in existing programming for women that would better accommodate Black women as well.

Group Members

Group members were university female students ranging in ages from 19-37 years. All Black women were at least 22 years of age. All members attended a pregroup interview during which appropriateness for group was assessed. This was the first Black women's group offered at the university counseling center, while the White women's group had had a long-time history on this large predominantly White university campus.

Procedure

An all Black women's therapy group and an all White women's therapy group were observed over a 4-month period by a counselor who served as co-leader for both groups. Attendance, problems presented and group activities were closely monitored by taking roll and process notes after each session. Notes were the result of discussions covering what had happened in group and the reassessing of group goals with perspective co-leaders. All counselors met periodically to discuss observations with a supervisor who did not lead either of the groups involved. Two of the counselors were doctoral level interns (including the counselor who observed both groups), while the third was a doctoral level practicum student who served as co-leader of the all Black women's group. Both co-leaders of the all Black women's group were Black.

Seven Black women and 12 White women were signed as group participants. Each member was given a "Rights and Responsibilities for Persons Enrolled in Group Programs at a Counseling Center" handout which was discussed during the pre-group interview. Groups were scheduled to meet for one and one-half hours each week.

Results

1. Most Black members had had no contact with the use of psychological services and those that had (N=2) had experienced only individual counseling. All White members had had prior contact with the use of psychological services on an individual basis and at least 1/3 (N=4) had had some group experience.

Implication(s) for group programming: Longer pregroup preparation interview sessions for Black women may be necessary. Counselors might possibly use short-term therapy (6-8 sessions) for those clients who have had no previous exposure to counseling in order to better prepare them for group. This period might

serve as an introduction to the helping process with the explicit intent of moving toward group therapy.

2. Most Black members had low and sporadic attendance, while all White members had high and consistent attendance even in the case of low interactors. Black women seemed to use group support as a shot in the arm in order to function better through a crisis, and then no longer felt the need to attend until the next low point or stressful period occurs. On the other hand, White women appeared to be more amenable to ongoing support regardless of their emotional state.

Implication(s) for programming: Black women's needs may best be met by one- or two-shot marathon sessions or "them-oriented" workshops based upon themes generated by a comprehensive needs assessment.

However, if ongoing weekly group is attempted, another possible means of increasing the probability of continued participation might be to have a session evaluation form or require logs from each member after each meeting in order that immediate feedback from the participants might be received and attended to in following sessions or in individual contact with leaders. This also might give the participants the feeling that the group was designed to meet their needs, therefore increasing the sense of group belongingness and trust.

3. Black women responded more often to expressions of positive emotions about outside events and anger toward others outside the group. Black group members also responded less often to emotions of sadness, hopelessness, and fear. Younger members expressed all emotions more often than the older members. Regardless of age, White women expressed emotions of sadness, hopelessness and fear more often and responded faster to these emotions when expressed by other members. However, White women expressed anger less often,

regardless of the object, and responded more slowly and less often to those members who did.

Implication(s) for programming: It might be necessary to structure exercises in Black women's groups that will elicit a wide range of emotional responses and generate discussion among group members about the difficulty in expressing emotions, which setting(s) they find most difficult to self-disclose and in which settings they feel most comfortable doing so.

4. Black women focused less often on family of origin issues, focusing more on the day to day struggles that make it difficult for them to function optimally. Black women never identified family as the cause of current problems, taking full responsibility for existing interpersonal problems. When family was discussed, they key topics were: the sense of loss that stemmed from being far away; and/or family problems that they felt helpless in addressing, but wished that they could do something about. Only White women focused on family of origin issues and worked through those issues in group in order to better understand present problems occurring in relationships. Only White group members identified their relationship with their family of origin as being the root of existing interpersonal and emotional ills. Black women spoke of feelings of responsibility to family in the present. White women spoke of family failure to meet responsibilities to them in the present and past.

Implication(s) for programming: It would seem more important that Black women groups are geared to the here and now and the development of and sharing in reaching their professional and personal goals as opposed to dwelling on the past. Disclosure of family background may be an issue that may come out once group cohesion and group trust has been highly developed.

5. Much more diversity existed among Black group members (i.e. racial identity levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, past experiences, values and attitudes) while there was much more similarity among White group members. What all Black women did share was the absence of a steady ongoing relationship with a partner which was a key topic of discussion. All White women were involved in an ongoing relationship; with three being married.

Implication(s) for programming: such levels of diversity may initially serve as enormous barriers that might slow the develop of group cohesion and trust; however, in the long run could be quite useful in Black women being provided with a wide variety of alternatives from which to choose in order to become better problem-solvers. The diversity could also provide an excellent forum in which group members could experience acceptance in spite of these differences. Given the obvious therapeutic benefits, providing a structured activity addressing the acceptance of individual differences during the first sessions might assist in overcoming these initial barriers.

For Black women, special programming might include developing a forum for discussion between Black men and women on campus. This might be critical, given the large amount of time spent disucssing the Black men.

6. Only Black women expressed an ongoing struggle with whether they were competent enough to maintain their present academic status level regardless of past or present GPA. In addition, Black women had the seemingly unresolvable burden of attempting to differentiate between whether negative reactions from White peers and professors were racist, sexist, or just personal reactions to them as unique individuals. There was also a tendency to question friendly gestures, wondering about possible ulterior motives on the part of the majority group member.

Implications: Special programming might include a workshop addressing the

skills necessary for the identification of racist behaviors, the influence of racism on racial minority group members, and coping strategies.

DISCUSSION

The Black women's group in this study was similar to those described in literature in several ways. Black women discussed the "hurtful" issues such as: the effects of skin color, interactions among Blacks, the relationship of Black men and women, bourgeois Blacks, and the role of church and God in their lives (Nobles, 1980; Pasteur & Toldsen, 1982; White, 1980). These are issues that would be rare topics for white or integrated groups. In addition, as the group progressed many of the Black women also began to use Black language with its unique rhythm and expressiveness (Pasteur & Toldsen, 1982), however, a few consistently remained reserved throughout the group.

On the other hand, unlike other dynamics described in literature addressing all Black female groups (Comer, 1980), racism was a major topic of discussion. Some of the participants spoke of negative treatment by White faculty, staff and students. A few of the women learned a great deal from the sharing of these experiences. Those naive to the dynamics of racism were younger, honor students, scholarship recipients, from middle-class backgrounds. They had experienced similar treatment at times, but had no understanding of the origin. The older, more experience Black women were very supportive and instructive in providing strategies to identify and cope with racism.

Regardless of the reasons behind the differences between Black and White women in the use of and reactions to group, results indicate a better fit between the needs of White women and the service modality provided by this university counseling center which is supported in previous research (Bergin &

Garfield, 1971; Chelsea, 1972). Because consistent, and continued attendance was seen as a true reflection of the service value to clientele, the group services' programming for Black women was discontinued after 4 semesters. No efforts were made to alter programming to fit the indicated needs of Black women who were once again subject to the possible peril, counselor bias, existing in individual counseling. This program deficit would then most likely remain until a new staff member arrives with the intent to once again do outreach to the minority student population. Such efforts will always be labeled "failures," if programs continue to use traditional therapeutic interventions that only fit the population for which it was designed and the present criteria for evaluation remains. Results from studies, such as this, which examine cross-cultural differences in the use of traditional therapeutic interventions would appear to be essential. Further examination is clearly indicated if university counseling centers are to become a more effective service to all student populations. Future studies might examine the actual needs of the Black female students, the student service office to which they would most likely come in order to find out information regarding their needs, and the amount of time that they might be able or willing to give in order to get particular needs met. Another study might, in fact, compare the differences of service utilization and satisfaction of services provided using traditional group services and a more nontraditional method of programming based on recommendations from this study. Not to continue in this line of research would be to perpetuate the injustice that the Black women have suffered far too long.

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